

This is a short talk about a very big subject – religion.

In Jane's world and the Regency Period, 1811-1820, the subject of Religion didn't play a huge role in any novel, but the position of clergyman in the Church of England was very evident.

Who can forget Mr. Collins in *Pride & Prejudice*, whose primary reason of existence was flattering Lady Catherine and then in second place was looking after his parish? Heaven knows where Charlotte came in – hopefully third.

Then there was Edward Ferrars, *Sense and Sensibility*, who preferred the church over parliament, ending up at Delaford, compliments of Colonel Brandon.

Then we have the Rev. Richard Moorland and Henry Tilney of *Northanger Abbey*. Mr. Philip Elton at Highbury in *Emma*. And, Charles Hayter ends up at Uppercross when Dr. Shirley retires in *Persuasion*

Dr. Grant and Edmund Bertram are in *Mansfield Park*. Sir Thomas Bertram had two churches and actually sold one to Grant to offset Edmund's lack of ability in making enough money to live.

As you can see – a somewhat prominent clergyman in every story.

In Regency times there was no fixed salary for the clergy; their income had to be made up from the selling of produce from their church land and tithe payments (one tenth of the cultivated land in the parish). Clergyman could also supplement their income by receiving money for baptisms, marriages and burials. 100 to 150 pounds per year was about what a young man could expect from a small parish. Young men, wishing to be clergyman, were really only interested in finding a parish rich enough to allow them to live like any other country landowner.

Trivia: Over 50 percent of graduates from Oxford and Cambridge took holy orders. Was that because they were religious or they wanted an easy life?

Duties for clergyman were not extensive. They had to attend church on Sunday for morning and evening services – with or without a sermon – and take communion 3 times a year.

Jane's father was very lucky as he was given two parishes, Steventon and Deane to look after, bringing him £210 per year plus that which he gained from tutoring pupils in Greek and Latin. That would be around £26,000 pounds today.

Such was the state of religion in Jane's world: Calm and peaceful.

MEANWHILE . . . . . IN THE REAL WORLD . . . . . ALL HELL WAS BREAKING LOOSE!

It had to do with the Catholic problem.

I was originally going to ask you questions at the end, but then I thought it would be better and more interesting if I gave the questions before the information.

Was Jane so wrapped up in the life of her novels that she wasn't interested in the outside world?

or

Was it important for her religion to remain strong – strong to the point that she couldn't bring herself to even discuss "the problem"?

To give you an idea about the state of religious beliefs in 1811-1820, I have to tell you a little about what went on before 1811.

I don't know if you remember this, but in 1562 the Supremacy Act made it treasonable if one did not swear allegiance to the throne, thereby making the Church of England the only acceptable religion. The Catholic Church was not recognised, therefore those that were Catholics could not hold office and were therefore represented in parliament by an Anglican.

There were many attempts at legislation in the United Kingdom towards Catholic Emancipation. They sought to remove the restrictions imposed on British and Irish Catholics. They encountered political opposition, especially in the climate of the ongoing friction with France and then the Napoleonic Wars. This continual friction with France led to unfounded fears that there had been a deliberate attempt by France to destabilize Britain before an imminent French invasion.

Now we are coming into the time of Jane and the religious events that would have directly affected her life and her family in the years of 1775-1817.

In 1778 The Popery Act was an effort to resolve the "Catholic Problem". (Jane would have been three years old.) This Act did allow some Catholics to hold office, but it was very restrictive and could be viewed as a compromise to appease the Catholics.

The passing of the Papists Act in 1778 was the cause of the Gordon Riots. On 2 June 1780 a crowd of around 50,000 people marched in procession from St George's Fields, an area in London, to the Houses of Parliament in order to present a huge petition against this Act as it was viewed by many as Catholic emancipation. The army was finally brought in to quell the unrest and killed or wounded around 450 people before they finally restored order. It is estimated that over £180,000 worth of property was destroyed during the Gordon Riots. £180,000 would be around £22million today, and double that for the dollar value.

Jane was only 5 at the time of the Gordon Riots – but can you imagine the incredible stories that were told about it for many days after the fact. There was no “instant” reporting in those days. News would have taken some time to reach the south of England.

An interesting fact: the government of the time wanted to settle the Catholic problem not for any great religious beliefs but rather because they needed more soldiers for the American Revolution and their ongoing battles with Spain, France and the Dutch. There were a lot of young men in Ireland and Scotland who were Catholic and didn't want to fight for those Anglicans.

The Roman Catholic Relief Act 1791 (Jane would have been 16) admitted Catholics to the practice of law and allowed them to practice their religion. On the other hand, chapels, priests and teachers had to be registered, Even though this law was still very restrictive, things were moving in the right direction.

As you have probably guessed by now – things did improve for the Catholics. The Roman Catholic Relief Act 1829 was passed by the Parliament which gave them the right to publically practice their religion and to hold a seat in parliament.

Another interesting fact: Almost nothing was mentioned in Jane's novels even though great events occurred during her life time.

- American war of independence 1775–1783 (Jane birth to 8)
- Napoleonic Wars 1803 – 1815 (Jane 28 – 40)
- And the never ending battles with Spain, France and The Dutch.

Great discussion points:

- Did Jane have many Catholic friends?
- Throughout all these years there must have been many discussions about the “Catholic Problem “especially as her father was in the clergy – yet not much in any of the stories. What do you think? Why was that?

Ann Craig.

#### Bibliography

- *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, Edited by Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster (1997)
- *Jane Austen for Dummies* (2006)
- *Cassell's Companion to Eighteenth Century Britain*, Stephen Brumwell and W.A. Speck (2001)
- *Jane Austen The world of her Novels*, Deirdre LeFaye (2002)
- Wikipedia
- *Voices from the World of Jane Austen*, Malcolm Day (2006)